

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 17, 2012

The Honorable Jane Lubchenco
Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere
United States Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Room 5128
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Dr. Lubchenco:

Residents of Alaska and other western coastal states are understandably concerned by the estimated 25 million tons of debris swept into the North Pacific during last year's devastating tsunami which hit northern Japan. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has been tracking and modeling the progress of this debris field based on wind and current information, and reports of sightings. Some wind-driven fishing floats already are reported to have reached shore in Washington and Alaska.

The Senate Commerce Committee has already taken steps in response to this issue. Senator Daniel Inouye's *Trash Free Seas Act*, which I co-sponsored, was reported favorably in early November to reauthorize NOAA's Marine Debris program. The bill was amended by Senator Maria Cantwell with language to address severe marine debris events such as this. Senator Inouye included appropriations language to provide an additional \$1 million for tsunami debris monitoring and cleanup.

You have my full commitment to work for final passage of the Inouye bill and seek full funding for NOAA's Marine Debris program. I appreciate your work with the Commerce Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries, and Coast Guard, which I chair, to hold a Congressional staff briefing on this issue soon after the 112th Congress gavels in its second session later this month. I join those who are eager to learn:

- Update on the status of the debris field and latest projections of transit times;
- Response planning with other federal agencies and state, local, and tribal governments;
- Special concerns such as dealing with potentially hazardous waste;
- Public outreach and communications plan;
- A synopsis of NOAA plans to use the additional funding for the Marine Debris Program;
- Additional needs to address this severe debris event.

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Thank you for NOAA's response and leadership on this issue to date. In addition to prompt recognition of the problem and work modeling the debris field, NOAA's web page dedicated to this issue has established itself as an important source of public information. Additional questions will certainly arise and need to be dealt with as we experience the full brunt of the debris field. We look forward to working with you on this issue.

Please contact my Legislative Assistant Bob King if you have any questions regarding this important issue. You can reach him at (202) 224-3004 or bob_king@begich.senate.gov.

I look forward to hearing from you on the questions raised in this letter.

Sincerely,



Mark Begich
United States Senator